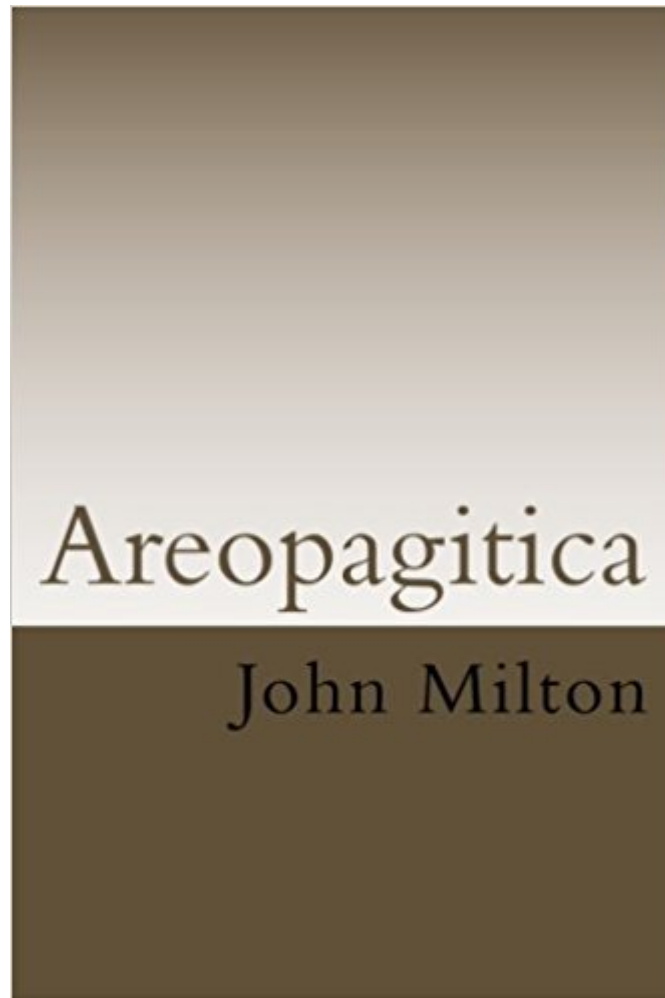


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# Areopagitica



## Synopsis

This is Milton's astonishing call from 1644 for complete freedom of speech and an end to any government censorship. He argues passionately yet logically in a text that still has much to teach us today, and which gives a real insight into the genuine radicalism of the English Revolution. Anyone interested in the development of political thought and the history of the fight against government censorship should read this seminal and ground-breaking text. Check out our other books at [www.dogstailbooks.co.uk](http://www.dogstailbooks.co.uk)

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## Customer Reviews

John Milton (1608 – 1674) was an English poet, polemicist, man of letters, and a civil servant for the Commonwealth of England under Oliver Cromwell. His poetry and prose reflect deep personal convictions, a passion for freedom and self-determination, and the urgent issues and political turbulence of his day. Writing in English, Latin, Greek, and Italian, he achieved international renown within his lifetime, and his celebrated *Areopagitica* (1644), written in condemnation of pre-publication censorship, is among history's most influential and impassioned defenses of free speech and freedom of the press. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Someone once asked if there was one book I would recommend getting a hard copy of to keep by our desks at all times. I had to think for a moment before it occurred to me that I already was doing that with a copy of the Constitution. It's got my underlining in it and an occasional note in the margin. I would put the *Areopagitica* in that category. It does not have a plot with characters. It is an early explanation for the need for freedom of expression at a time when that freedom had just been

curtailed. Written more than a hundred years before our Constitution, it is the precursor to our First Amendment. Our Constitution did not spring out of nowhere. There were texts like this for our Founding Fathers to read to give them a common literature on which to agree when drafting the Constitution.

Why wouldn't you read this, and love it? Freedom of the press, baby!

Freedom of speech is not a modern day issue back in 1600s England, Parliament tried to regulate what is printed. Milton makes the case that every one has freedom to say his or her beliefs

This document is a classic document in its field of the freedom of expression. First we need to push aside arguments that are no longer valid to assess the pamphlet. It was actually written and published to protest against another pamphlet about divorce (the author's own personal problem then) that had been censored in other words refused for registration and licensing. Thus does not permit any evaluation of the pamphlet. We also have to push aside the connection of the title with the people Milton knew or quoted in his pamphlet. He quotes Lord Brooke, actually known as a poet under the name of Fulke Greville, and this person was connected to a group of poets known as the Areopagus. This group was for a reform of poetry in England, and in English, supposedly on the model of the French Academie of Pierre de Ronsart. It was composed of Edmund Spenser, Gabriel Harvey (aka Archangel Gabriel), Edward Dyer, Sir Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville Lord Brooke. I will not enter the debate dating from the beginning of the 20th century between Howard Maynardier, "The Areopagus of Sidney and Spenser" in *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (April 1909), pp. 289-301, published by the Modern Humanities Research Association, available at [...], accessed August 11, 2016, on one hand, and Edward Fulton, "Spenser, Sidney, and the Areopagus" in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (June 1916), pp. 372-374, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2915729>, accessed August 11, 2016. The former negates the existence of this group known as the Areopagus, whereas the latter insists on the close and friendly relations between the various members of that group, particularly Edmund Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney. Both should have insisted on the fact that this let's say informal group of closely related people was the antechamber or the crucible in which the school of poetry known as the Metaphysical Poets

came to life with John Donne among the leading few who have reached us. This is essential because it determines the style of John Milton's pamphlet, and along with the style the fact that we can consider his reasoning as defective not in the conclusions but in the arguments that are "metaphysical" that is to say witty, brilliant in learnedness, trying to build the whole pamphlet around allusions, more or less explicit, to ancient and biblical cultures. The style and the reasoning are in many ways surprising to a modern mind for whom comparing or just using ellipses between various elements cannot be considered as proof or evidence, or even a simple demonstration. To conclude on that point, John Milton does not refer to this group known as the Areopagus but to Greece: "Thus the books of Protagoras were by the judges of Areopagus commanded to be burnt, and himself banished [from] the territory for a discourse begun with his confessing not to know WHETHER THERE WERE GODS, OR WHETHER NOT." The title of the pamphlet is thus derived from this censoring practice that, by the way, John Milton approves. He repeats several times that his opposition to censoring should never concern and benefit "either blasphemous and atheistical, or libelous writings or authors" This clearly expels from the benefit of the freedom of expression any text that rejects the existence of God or that derides religion which is assimilated to blasphemous writings on one hand, hence the religious side of discussions, thinking and expressing oneself, to which you have to add the political side covered by the term "libelous." This excludes by principle any religious writing that could be considered as popish, i.e. Catholic in spirit or in actual reference. In modern terms this exclusion reduces this freedom of expression to only those who stand within the pale of the Reformation, brothers within the Reformation who demonstrate their "Unity of Spirit" and their "Bond of Peace." In modern terms this would be considered rather fundamentalistic. But within the Puritan context of England in the 17th century this can be considered as rather tolerant. In fact and furthermore we could add that the style is very often extremely humble towards the Puritans in Parliament, both the Commons and the Lords. He even knows some are going to say it is flattery and he justifies himself by saying 1- it is praise; 2- it is based on real facts; 3- no flattery is intended. This is not a real syllogism but only an accumulative set of three assertions: the third one could be seen as the conclusion of the first two, but it is not. We do not have flattery in the following circumstances: "First, when that only is praised which is solidly worth praise[;] next, when greatest likelihoods are brought that such things are truly and really in those persons to whom they are ascribed[;] the other, when he who praises, by showing that such his actual persuasion is of whom he writes, can demonstrate that he flatters

not. That accumulative way of thinking is systematic. The target of the pamphlet is the Ordinance we have just presented, and along with the Ordinance, the two houses of Parliament, the Commons and the Lords, who have passed this Ordinance, but also the committee of censors that he calls the committee of twenty. His first argument against it is that it is the going back to the Star Chamber practices of the kind that had been terminated by a decision of Parliament, hence to go back to censorship that had been abolished by Parliament. Along that line he alludes to the instating of registration, without ever using the word copyright, in 1557 in order to reimpose Catholicism in England. He forgets to say it was kept by Elizabeth this time to control and ban anything Catholic. By only alluding to these facts he can easily concentrate on the Star Chamber under the Stuarts and on more distant roots identified as the Spanish Inquisition at the end of the 15th century and the imprimatur imposed after the invention of the printing press, hence at the end of the 15th century too. He can thus identify any censorship with Catholicism and knowing that the Stuarts and Elizabeth were not Catholic he identify the Catholic church with what he calls "prelacy" which is the government of the church or religion by prelates in a hierarchical system, a system that has been kept by the Anglican Church. This is rather simple. The roots of censorship are a lot more general than the Catholic Church and a lot deeper in time than the 15th century. Before printing; for example in Medieval Europe copying was the main activity of monasteries and as such only Catholic monks could take part in this activity, which meant in many ways censorship of course. Censorship comes from the necessity, the need, the impulse of human society to control its resources, its means, its actions, and its general services and needs. And such a stance goes back to the emergence of humanity some 300,000 years ago in Africa. Homo Sapiens by inventing language became a power and control species in which those who commanded language, particularly memorial language and spiritual language, were naturally able to control their social groups, the minds of the people. That could have enabled him to widen his discourse on the liberating dimension of this movement he identifies in England towards the freedom of expression based on the freedom of thought. And in spite of this limit he is able to refer to Wycliffe as the basic reformed thinker in Christian Europe who can be seen as the father of all Reformation schools of thinking, itself seen as the liberation of the minds of people, the discovery of truth and its reconstruction. That is where we come across the idea that knowledge has to be built, constructed by man because knowledge was smashed and scattered all over (no precision about when and by whom though we may think by God himself) and man note he always considers knowledge and the collecting of knowledge from a masculine point of view though Truth and Virtue are systematically feminine as if man could only

desire feminine entities. Milton has to search the world for the pieces and bring them together and re-assemble them. The comparison with Osiris and Isis is weak here because it is a completely different religious heathen context that would be considered as pagan by anyone in the 17th century, including England who was at the time engaged in colonizing the Carolinas and Virginia ruthlessly, at least for the native pagan American Indians who were not considered as human beings, Pocahontas being a rare exception in those days, a sort of alibi who provided John Rolfe with the method to grow and cure tobacco when she converted (under duress) and married the English pioneer who was in actual facts a plain colonizer. But this constructive approach is today perfectly understandable though John Milton in his Puritan world attributes this psychological genesis of man to the decision of God to provide this man with the freedom to choose, hence the responsibility to be good or bad, which means also the responsibility to cope with divine and human punishment for bad decisions and choices. He goes one step further when he explains that God has created man with the mind that enables him to search the world, recognize what is true or false, assemble the true elements together and build a knowledge that is characterized by some "elegant symmetry" that is to say some pleasing look that satisfies man's search for equilibrium, harmony, etc. We could consider many of these elements as quite pertinent as for man's psychogenesis and the psychogenesis of human knowledge. Of course he does not take into account the role of language since for him language is part of the creation of God that God gave man along with "the gift of reason and the freedom to choose. For Milton this has one consequence: thinking, speaking and printing have to be absolutely free because otherwise habits, customs, "laziness (of a licensing church) and conformity, homogenization and uniformizing are the results of the absence of confrontation of ideas, within the pale of Reformed religion of course. This is probably the most important argument against censorship and for the freedom of expression: minds have to be free in order to be creative and investigative. But instead of concentrating on this argument that is by far rich enough to write a pamphlet he too often reduce his thinking by using authority arguments: Athens, Lacedaemon, Rome and the Romans, Moses, Daniel, Paul, Dionysus Alexandrinus, Plato, Francis Bacon, Lord Brooke, Galileo, Isis-Osiris, Zwingli and Calvin, Wycliffe, Janus, Micaiah and Ahab, and many other arguments of the sort that are not attributed to someone or some identified situation. To explore these references we would need many pages especially since Milton does not give any real references to what he alludes to. Quoting was not standard in those days and using some text or fact without any reference was not considered as plagiarism but just borrowing, though it definitely was plagiarism. In fact this

pamphlet in modern times would not go through even for students because it is built from too many unidentified and non-referenced borrowings, because the structure is neither clear nor coherent and because the main arguments could be reduced to four or five and developed in logical and psychological terms, not to speak of the very courteous tone and style directed at the Puritans in power, both Commons and Lords, hence Parliament as a whole, which implies that he does not step one single toe out of the reformed vision of God and His creation. It is very similar to René Descartes explaining that his scientific work in physics and astronomy reveals the elegance, symmetry and order in the universe, which proves the existence of a reasoning supreme being behind this creation, hence of God. The 17th century was not a century ready to liberate itself from any compulsory reference to God. The only freedom they had was to change affiliation (which was also dangerous) or to enter theological discussions on various points within the established faith of the church you affiliated yourself to. Then the main interest is to show the battle around freedom of speech and freedom of thought in England in the 17th century, a battle that is both political and intellectual: political to reject the absolute conception of monarchy and the King under the Stuarts; intellectual to keep the debate of ideas in all sorts of domains alive, vivid and even visionary for the sake of the nation, intellectuals, all preaching clergy and in the end everyone since this freedom of thought and expression enables society to change and improve towards a better integration in God's plans for the future. The reference to God has to be pushed aside in today's world to have a wider conception: freedom of thought and expression is necessary for intellectuals and scientists to remain creative and responsive to the real needs of humanity, for all educators to be able to open up their students to looking for the truth and trying to improve their lives and their ethics, and for all human beings to be able to follow change, and even at times precede it in real life and the material world. Religion is another level that can be added by individuals for various personal, social, cultural or heritage reasons, any religion of course, and research, knowledge, education can be built on these religions in the same perspective of freedom of thought and expression, the faith in God being another motivation for those who accept it. This implies this God is in phase with John Milton's: a God of intellectual endeavor, ethical improvement and sharing with all people around in a spirit of tolerance and peace, not because we are all members of the same church but because we are all members of the human species. This keeps a good dose of modernity to this text, in spite of the difficult language of it. Dr Jacques COULARDEAU

When John Milton looked at the state of education in England, he foresaw a not too distant future

when those who were then students would receive an inappropriate education and thus someday emerge as tragically flawed leaders. This imbalance he was determined to avoid. When he looked at the inability of writers like himself to get a manuscript published without pre-publication approval, he foresaw a day when freedom itself would be no more than a dimly remembered dream. This too he determined to avoid. In his tracts, "On Education" and "Areopagitica," he appealed both to his readers and to the leaders of Parliament to recognize the looming dangers and to take corrective measures. Sadly, in both cases, his efforts went for naught. When Milton wrote in prose as in "On Education," he tended to write about issues that affected him personally and directly. His ability to take personal experience and to infuse that experience into a larger social context resonated with his readers even if they could not take immediate action. As a youth, Milton had the advantage of receiving a humanist education at the St. Paul's School, the curriculum of which contained not only the course content that he desired but also its proper sequence. Those years were happy ones for him. When he was old enough, he enrolled in Cambridge where the curriculum was decidedly less to his liking. Education on a middle school, high school, or university level at that time was either of the humanist sort of St. Paul's or the traditionally stifling curriculum as typified by Cambridge. The need for education and curriculum reform might have been seen as less dire for his nation had Milton not been so personally involved--mentally, spiritually, and intellectually--at all levels. Milton was a true scholar in an age of true scholars. His erudition in many areas was impressive, especially in the classics, languages, and history. Learning ought to have been a joy--as it had been at St. Paul's. But at Cambridge, the soporific style of the trivium and the quadrivium convinced him that the best and the brightest of England's young men (women were not often included in schooling nor was Milton particularly concerned with that) were being forced to learn in a sequence that would drive them away from further education. Since Milton had some experience tutoring young scholars using methods of his own, he became convinced that these methods, if applied across the board in all schools in England, would churn out a new and eager generation of soldier scholars who in true Renaissance fashion could feel equally at home in the classroom, in industry, on the battlefield, or in the laboratory. In essence, he viewed all students as younger clones of himself, who, with the right mental stimulation, would be more than eager to undertake a hugely complex and diverse series of subjects in a curriculum that would keep them busy from sunup to well past sundown. The problem with instituting such a radical change in English school curriculums was that the current system of Aristotelian thought was so thoroughly entrenched that it would take more than a few disenchanted school masters like Milton to effect any significant changes. Thus, he was a failure in his day to modify his nation's schools but today, educational theorists recognize that he was still right in his



basic assumptions even if his contemporaries themselves failed to notice. Milton's concern for literary freedom was of considerably greater import than his concern for curriculum change. In "Areopagitica," he addresses not only his dissatisfaction with the government's requiring the licensing of all manuscripts slated for publication as a prerequisite for publication, but he further suggests that censorship of ideas is a slippery slope from which many other freedoms might be imperiled. Milton, as a classic scholar of the highest ability, used the full bag of his impressive stock of rhetorical flourishes to sway a Parliament to rescind its Licensing Order of 1643 that reinstated the hated censorship that had plagued England for decades. Since he knew that many of the Lords of Parliament shared much of his erudition, Milton felt free to unleash a wave of classical and biblical allusions that he felt sure would enable these Lords to imagine that they were the modern descendants of the judges that Isocrates faced at the Areopagus nearly two thousand years ago. Milton described the long and lamentable catalog of human failure that was censorship through the ages. He suggested that the very ones trusted to censor potentially objectionable texts must over time become as tainted as the books they were censoring. Milton reminded his Lords that if God created man with reason, then man must be trusted enough to use that reason to distinguish good from evil. Finally, he concludes by noting that since truth comes in many forms, it would be impossible for any group of well-meaning censors to recognize the difference between an obvious truth and one less obvious. Ironically, as Milton failed to do with "On Education" he similarly failed with "Areopagitica." The Lords of Parliament retained the restrictive licensing for many years. However, as with the eternal wisdom inhering in both tracts, future generations now agree that Milton was a man far ahead of his times. Thus, from a failure of his day, Milton is now seen as presciently successful.

Anytime one looks at a work in another historical context, consideration of time and place must be given if the communicator's message is to make sense. This seventeenth century oration was delivered by John Milton to Parliament, with the central theme of the right of individuals to seek out the truth for themselves. A Christian worldview was the framework from which Milton's peers made decisions. The age of official state religions was a contemporary issue. Milton calls for the individual conscious to be the determining factor, not an institution. He bases his argument on historical precedent, the Bible, errors made by the Roman Catholic Church, and the virtue of the members of Parliament.

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